

"I suppose I helped to kill him!" Markart shrugged his shoulders helplessly. Silence came again. Very long it seemed; but, on looking at his watch, Markart found that it was not yet half past 6.

Again the door opened, and Stafnitz called to them both. They followed him into the next room. Stenovic was sitting at the table, with his hands clasped on it in front of him. Stafnitz took up a position by his side, standing as though on duty. Natcheff had disappeared. Stenovic spoke in calm, deliberate tones. He seemed to have assumed command of the operations again.

"Captain Markart, I'm about to intrust to you an important and responsible duty. For the next twenty-four hours and afterward until relieved by my orders you will be in charge of this man Lepage and will detain him in these apartments. His own room and this room will be at the disposal of yourself and your prisoner, but you must not let the prisoner out of your sight. Dr. Natcheff remains in his room. He will have access to the king's room when he desires, but he will not leave the suit of apartments. Beyond seeing to this you will have no responsibility for him. The door leading to the suit will be locked by me and will be opened only by me or by my orders. I remain at the palace tonight. Under me Captain Sterkoff will be the officer on guard. He will himself supply you with any meals or other refreshments which you may require. Ring this hand bell on the table—no other bell, mind—and he will be with you immediately. Do you understand your orders?"

Markart understood them very well. There was no need of Stafnitz's mocking little smile to point the meaning. Markart was to be Lepage's jailer; Sterkoff was to be his. Under the most civil and considerate form he was made as close a prisoner as the man he guarded. Evidently Stenovic had come to the conclusion that he could not ask Markart to put too great a strain on his conscience. The general, however, seemed very kindly disposed toward him and was, indeed, almost apologetic.

"I've every hope that this responsible and, I fear, very irksome duty may last only the few hours I mentioned. You put me under a personal obligation by undertaking it, my dear Markart."

In the absence of any choice Markart saluted and answered, "I understand my orders, general."

Stafnitz interposed, "Captain Sterkoff is also aware of their purport."

Stenovic looked vexed. "Yes, yes, but I'm sure Markart himself is quite enough." It seems odd that in the midst of such a transaction as that in which he was engaged Stenovic should have found leisure or heart to care about Markart's feeling. Yet so it was—a curiously human touch creeping in. He shut Markart up only under the strongest sense of necessity and with great reluctance. Probably Stafnitz had insisted in the private conversation which they had held together. Markart had shown such evident signs of jibbing over the job proposed for Captain Hercules!

Lepage's heart was wrung, but his spirit was not broken. Stafnitz's ironic smile called an answering one to his lips.

"It would console my feelings if I also were put in charge of somebody, general," he said. "Shall I, in my turn, keep an eye on Dr. Natcheff or report if the captain here is remiss in the duty of keeping himself a prisoner?"

"I don't think you need trouble yourself, M. Lepage. Captain Sterkoff will relieve you of responsibility." To Lepage, too, Stenovic was gentle, urbane, almost apologetic.

"And how long am I to live, general?"

"You're in the enviable position, M. Lepage, of being able, subject to our common mortality, to settle that for yourself. Come, come, we'll discuss matters again tomorrow night or the following morning. There are many men who prefer not to do things, but will accept a thing when it's done. They're not necessarily unwise. I've done no worse to you than give you the opportunity of being one of them. I think you'll be prudent to take it. Anyway, don't be angry. You must remember that you've given us a good deal of trouble."

"Between us we have killed the king."

Stenovic waved his hands in a commiserating way. "Practical men mustn't spend time in lamenting the past," he said.

"Nor in mere conversation, however pleasant," Stafnitz broke in, with a laugh. "Captain Markart, march your prisoner to his quarters."

His smile made the order a mockery. Markart felt it, and a hatred of the man rose in him. But he could do nothing. He did not lead Lepage to his quarters, but followed sheepishly in his prisoner's wake. They went together into the little room where Lepage slept.

"Close quarters, too, captain," said the valet. "There is but one chair. Let me put it at your service." He himself sat down on the bed, took out his tobacco and began to roll himself a cigarette.

Markart shut the door and then threw himself on the solitary chair in a heavy despondency of spirit and a confused conflict of feelings. He was glad to be out of the work, yet he resented the manner in which he was put inside. There were things going on in which it was well to have no hand. Yet was there not a thing going on in which every man ought to have a hand on one side or the other? Not to do it, but to be ready to accept it when done! He was enough of a soldier to feel that there lay the worst, the meanest thing of all. Not to dare to do it, but to profit by the doing! Stenovic had used the words to Lepage, his prisoner. By making him in effect a prisoner,

too, the general showed that he applied them to the captain also. Anything seemed better than that—any, it would be better to ride to Prasiok behind Captain Hercules! In that adventure a man might, at least, risk his life!

"An odd world!" said the valet, puffing out his cigarette smoke. "Hones, men for prisoners and murderers for jailers! Are you a prisoner or a jailer, Captain Markart?"

Chapter Twenty-five

TO say the truth, the word "murderers" seemed to Captain Markart more than a little harsh. To use it was to apply to Kravonian affairs the sterner standards of more steady going, squeamish countries. A coup d'etat may well involve fighting. Fighting naturally includes killing. But are the promoters of the coup therefore murderers? Murderers with a difference, anyhow, according to Kravonian ideas, which Captain Markart was inclined to share. Moreover, a coup d'etat is war. The suppression of information is legitimate in war. If the Prince of Slavna could not find out for himself what had happened in the palace, were his opponents bound to tell him? In fact, given that an attempt to change the succession in your own interest was not a crime, but a legitimate political enterprise, the rest followed.

Except Mistitch! It was difficult to swallow Mistitch. There was a mixture of ingenuity and brutality about that move which not even Kravonian notions could easily accept. If Stafnitz had gone—nay, if he himself had been sent—probably Markart's conscience would not have rebelled. But to send Captain Hercules—that was clogging the dice! Yet he was very angry that Stenovic should have divined his feelings and shut him up. The general distrusted his courage as well as his conscience. There lay the deepest hurt to Markart's vanity. It was all the deeper because in his heart he had to own that Stenovic read him right. Not only the brazen conscience was lacking, but also the iron nerve.

Getting no answer to his unpleasantly pointed question, Lepage relapsed into silence. He stood by the window, looking out on the lawn which sloped down to the Krath. Beyond the river the lights of Slavna glowed in the darkening sky. Things would be happening in Slavna soon. Lepage might well look at the city thoughtfully. As a fact, however, his mind was occupied with one problem only—where was Zerkovitch and how could he get at him? For Lepage did not waver. He had taken his line.

Presently, however, his professional instincts seemed to reassure themselves. He opened a cupboard in the room and brought out a clean pair of sheets, which he proceeded to arrange on the bed. Busy at his task, he paused to smile at Markart and say: "We must do the best we can, captain. After all, we have both camped, I expect! Here's the bed for you—you'll do finely." He went back to the cupboard and lugged out a mattress. "And this is for me—the shakedown on the floor which I use when I sleep in the king's room—or did use, I should say. In my judgment, captain, it's comfortable to go to bed on the floor. At least one can't fall."

It was 8 o'clock. They heard the outer door of the suit of rooms open and shut. A man was moving about in the next room. If they could judge by the sound of his steps he also paid Dr. Natcheff a brief visit. They heard the clink of dishes and of glass.

"Dinner!" said Lepage. "Ah, that's not unwelcome! Have I permission?" Markart nodded, and he opened the door. On the table in the sitting room was a savory dish, bread and two bottles of wine. Captain Sterkoff was just surveying the board he had spread, with his head on one side. There was nothing peculiar in that. His head was permanently stuck on one side—a list to starboard—since the Virgin with the lamp had injured the vertebrae of his neck. But the attitude, together with his beaked nose, made him look like a particularly vicious parrot. Markart saw him through the open door and could not get the resemblance out of his mind.

"Supper, gentlemen!" said Sterkoff, with malevolent mirth. "The doctor can't join you. He's a little upset and keeps his bed. A good appetite! I trust not to be obliged to disturb you again tonight."

Markart had come in by now, but he was too surly and sore to speak. Without a word he plumped down into a chair by the table and rested his chin on his hands, staring at the cloth. It was left to Lepage to bow to Sterkoff and to express their joint thanks. This task was performed with sufficient urbanity. Then he broke into a laugh.

"They must think it odd to see you carrying dishes and bottles about the palace, captain?"

"Possibly," agreed Sterkoff. "But, you see, my friend, what they think in the palace doesn't matter very much, so long as none of them can get outside."

"Oh, they none of them spend the evening out?"

"Would they wish to when the king has an attack of influenza and Dr. Natcheff is in attendance? It would be unfeeling, Lepage!"

"Horribly, captain! Probably even the sentries would object?"

"It's possible they would," Sterkoff agreed again. He drew himself up and saluted Markart, who did not move or pay any attention. "Good night, Lepage." He turned to the door. His head seemed more cocked on one side than ever. Lepage bade him "Good night" very respectfully, but as the key turned in the door he murmured longingly, "Ah, if I could knock that ugly mug the rest of the way off his shoulders!"

He treated Markart with no less respect than he had accorded to Sterkoff. He would not hear of sitting down at table with an officer, but insisted on handing the dish and uncorking the wine. Markart accepted his attentions and began to eat languidly, with utter want of appetite.

"Some wine, captain. Some wine to cheer you up in this tiresome duty of guarding me!" cried Lepage, picking up a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other. "Oh, but that wry necked fellow has brought you a dirty glass! A moment, captain! I'll wash it." And off he bounded—not even waiting to set down the bottle—into the little room beyond.

His brain was working hard now, marshaling his resources against his difficulties. The difficulties were thirty feet to fall, Sterkoff's sentries, the broad, swift current of the Krath—for even in normal times there was always a sentry on the bridge—then the search for Zerkovitch in Slavna. His resources were a mattress, a spare pair of sheets and a vial half full of the draft which Dr. Natcheff had prescribed for the king.

"It's very unfortunate, but I've not the least notion how much would kill him," thought Lepage, as he poured the medicine—presumably a strong sedative—into the wineglass and filled up with wine from the bottle Sterkoff had provided. He came back, holding the glass aloft with a satisfied air. "Now it's fit for a gentleman to drink out of," said he, as he set it down by Markart's hand. The captain took it up and swallowed it at a draft.

"Ugh! Coked, I think! Beastly, anyhow!" said he.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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Time Table.

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NORTH BOUND.

No. 236—Paducah—Cairo	Accommodation leave.....6:42 a.m.
No. 206—Evansville and Louisville Express.....	11:20 a.m.
No. 26—Chicago-Nashville Limited.....	8:15 p.m.

SOUTH BOUND.

No. 25—Nashville and Chicago Limited.....	6:42 a.m.
No. 205—Evansville-Paducah-Louisville Express arrive.....	6:25 p.m.
No. 321—Evansville and Nashville Mail.....	3:50 p.m.

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TIME TABLE.

TRAINS GOING NORTH.

No. 52—St. Louis Express, 10:16 a.m.
No. 54—St. L. Fast Mail, 10:05 p.m.
No. 92—C. & St. L. Lim., 6:09 a.m.
No. 56—Hopkinsville Ac. 8:55 p.m.
No. 94—Dixie Flyer, 5:43 p.m.

TRAINS GOING SOUTH.

No. 51—St. L. Express 5:19 p.m.
No. 53—St. L. Fast Mail 5:37 a.m.
No. 93—C. & N. O. Lim. 11:50 p.m.
No. 55—Hopkinsville Ac. 7:05 a.m.
No. 95—Dixie Flyer, 9:37 a.m.

No. 52 and 54 connect at St. Louis points west.

No. 51 connects at Guthrie for Memphis, La. points as far south as Erin and for Louisville Cincinnati and the East.

No. 53 and 55 make direct connection at Guthrie for Louisville, Cincinnati and all points north and east thereof. No. 53 and 55 also connect for Memphis and way points.

No. 92 runs through to Chicago and will not carry passengers to point South of Evansville. Also carries through sleepers to St. Louis.

No. 2, through sleepers to Atlanta, Macon, Jacksonville, St. Augustine and Tampa, Fla. Also Pullman sleepers to New Orleans. Connects at Guthrie for points East and West. Will not carry local passengers for points North Nashville Tenn.